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SUBJECT: TUNISIAN REACTION TO SADDAM EXECUTION

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The GOT Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an official statement on December 30 expressing its "deep regret" that Saddam Hussein was executed on the first day of Eid al-Idha. This sentiment was echoed in private conversations; Tunisian contacts who passed the Eid holiday watching al-Jazeera coverage of the execution described feelings of anger, frustration, and humiliation, both with the judgment and its timing. Meanwhile, Tunisia's main labor union held a demonstration in downtown Tunis, with protesters glorifying Saddam as a "martyr" and denouncing US "murderers." END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) On December 30, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs released an official statement through the Tunisia-Africa Press Agency (TAP, www.tap.info.tn). The statement, like most issued by the GOT, reflected Tunisia's traditional moderate position on pan-Arab issues, and called for stability and non-violence in Iraq. It also expressed deep regret for Saddam's execution on the Eid al-Idha.

Begin Text of MFA Statement (TAP translation):

After the execution of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, Tunisia voices deep regret that this execution took place on the day of Eid el-Idha. Tunisia considers the implementation of this sentence of this day is a serious blow to the feelings of the Muslim people, at a time when they celebrate a sacred religious feast.

While reiterating the need to preserve the unity, integrity and stability of Iraq, Tunisia expresses hope that this execution will not result in an escalation of tension and violence and that the brotherly Iraqi people will achieve national conciliation, as part of understanding and concord.

End Text.

¶3. (SBU) Many private Tunisians expressed their surprise on the morning of December 30, when they learned of Saddam's execution in the early hours of the first day of Eid. News coverage of the execution began as Tunisians proceeded to morning prayer, setting a muted tone to Eid celebrations that continued through the January 1st New Year's holiday. As one woman summarized, the execution "spoiled the whole holiday." Given Tunisia's largely secular and pan-Arab nature, most Tunisians denounce the US "occupation" of Iraq and voice quiet support for Saddam and the Iraqi resistance. These feelings were fueled by the timing of the execution, which was viewed as a joint US-Shia effort to humiliate Sunni Arabs.

¶4. (U) Tunisian media reaction to the Saddam execution reflected ire over the holy day timing and sectarian tones of the execution, doubts about the present and future of the Iraqi state and frustration at the perceived American hand in the mess. Some writers, however, expressed little regret at

the dictator's passing. The following selections from Tunisian newspapers in recent days reflect the range of views:

-- "No one in the world should doubt that Saddam's execution, as well as his trial, were completely American decisions even if implemented by Iraqis. It is true that Americans and their allies killed Saddam as a body but they built him up as a symbol and a martyr...which will push the resistance movement forward."

-- "The real defeat is not of Saddam, who finally only got what he deserved, nor of his...Western accomplices, who hypocritically congratulate themselves on his execution...it is rather of the Iraqis who have paid for (Saddam's) crimes...and who continue to pay under his former accomplices, who have today become his honorable, executioners."

-- "Saddam's execution on the Eid holiday is considered a disgrace to all human values in the world...an insult by Bush to all Muslims..."

¶5. (U) According to press reports, the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), which is known to include Bathist sympathizers and pan-Arabists, held a demonstration in downtown Tunis January 2, with "hundreds" protesting Saddam's hanging. Among those said to be present was Ahmed Seddiq, a Tunisian lawyer who was on Saddam's defense team. The demonstrators, who assembled outside the labor union's headquarters, reportedly carried portraits of Saddam and chanted "Martyr!" interspersed with denunciations of US "murderers."

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